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Sermon

PREACHED AT THE

NATIONAL SCOTCH CHURCH,

ST. MATTHEW'S, HALIFAX,

On the morning of 1st January, 1865,

BY

THE REV. GEORGE M. GRANT, A. M.

HALIFAX, N. S.
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THE undersigned, a few of the oldest parishioners of ST. MATTHEW'S, highly appreciating the sound religious philosophy, and literary beauty, of the Sermon delivered yesterday morning, by their esteemed minister, the Reverend G. M. GRANT, respectfully request that he will allow five hundred copies of it to be printed, and distributed at their expense, as an acceptable and timely New Year's gift, to the youth of our own and kindred congregations.

HALIFAX, 2d Jan'y, 1865.

WILLIAM YOUNG,
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JAMES McNAB,
JAMES F. AVERY.
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SERMON.

"*Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.*"—ECCLES. xi. 9.

MAN, as material and spiritual, is linked to two distinct worlds or systems of things. Duties devolve upon him from his relation to each, and it is the great practical difficulty of life to adjust the respective claims of the two. Human nature is one, but it is compound; and so different in kind is the one part of it from the other, that there often seems to be in man two natures, as there are in him two springs of action. On the one hand, man is flesh and blood, with impulses, appetites, passions, desires, craving for instant gratification; and he is in a beautiful world filled with objects and arrangements adapted and designed to meet all the hunger and thirst of his sentient nature, and thus to give him that gratification which, with all the imperiousness of instinct and necessity, he demands. But in this earthly there is a heavenly citizen. Man is also a spiritual being, having in him "a connexion exquisite of distant worlds," spiritual capacities which no created thing can compass or fill, imperative convictions of duty which are felt to be everlasting in obligation, and which must be obeyed, though feeble sense and quivering nerve and fibre shrink back from the work.

It is from the fact that there is in us this double nature that the practical difficulties of life arise. One-sided views of our nature cause us to attach too much importance to par-

ticular duties, and thus we have a one-sided and unhealthy life. The error in such cases is that truth is exaggerated; and there is vitality in the errors just because of the truth on which they are based. There are two extremes. One extreme is to consider man as related only to the material. Then he is an animal, and only an animal, the ape his nearest progenitor. Like the inferior creatures, he eats, drinks, and is merry,—gambols like a kitten when his blood is young and his spirits buoyant,—rages like a tiger when his appetites are full grown, and irritated, or provoked by opposition. Like them he basks in the sunshine, and rests in the shade,—enjoys the genial influences of the heavens, and the fruits of kind mother earth. Like them he cowers in the dark or the cold, in sickness or loneliness,—sometimes lamenting loudly his hapless lot,—sometimes suffering in sullen stoicism, submitting to necessity because necessity makes him submit. If this be all that man is, he is the great enigma of creation; his fine spirit is attun'd to coarse issues; all his hopes, prayers, sacrifices, mock him.

> "Dragons in their prime
> That tear each other in their slime,
> Are mellow music matched with him."

Yet such a creed has a fascination for some minds. They will have nothing metaphysical; they must have "a positive philosophy." To them all life is only organized matter; nature is only what they see it to be—a dead log, and no veil of the spiritual. And if their own souls speak to them of the infinite, of moral order, of the Great Father God, they ignore the teaching. Spirit is not; thought and conscience are subtle forms of matter. But while such philosophic and professed materialists are few we meet every day practical materialists who scout the creed, yet act up to it consistently. There are millions who live exactly as they would live did

they believe that there are no spiritual realities, with the exception, perhaps, that they use on their lips the language of the book that takes its stand on the existence of spirit, and that now and then they are awe-stricken, and not by mundane considerations. They believe in God, judgment, eternity; and that the sources of true happiness must be in the soul itself and not in the outward; yet they live only for time, think only of its pleasures and distinctions. From such a life I endeavour to wean myself and you. How often do we say that the soul is the one thing valuable; yet, alas! we think little of our own souls, we go little out of our way to attempt the rescue of a lost one, when we will rise early and sit up late, plan, toil, and run risks to get gain, or fame, or sensual happiness.

There is another extreme view of nature and life, the infection of which is very general and very pernicious, and that is to regard man as if he were exclusively related to the spiritual; and therefore to put to the ban the body and its powers, the world of matter and of art, of society and human relationships as evil or at least not good, a realm not of God and unrelated to religion. We now meet with few who profess such a creed pure and simple, but it has been reduced to system, and philosophically maintained. More than one sect of heretics in the infancy of Christianity held that the world was made by the principle of evil, and that the material was essentially evil. The heresy did not spring out of the Christian Church or dogmas, but from the wild fermentings of thought and fantastic theosophies of the East and of Alexandria; and it has found its fullest developments in Persia, India, and parts of the world where Christianity never gained sure footing. Other heretics held that the maker of the world was not God, but an inferior power, and that therefore our duties which spring from our relationship to it are less

sacred, less from God than those which belong to the domain of the spiritual. Throughout the history of the Church such views have received practical expression in various forms of asceticism, in recluses, coenobites, flagellants, "eremites in cell," and orders which in some epochs and countries have embraced an immense portion of the Christian population. The influence of such views is still powerfully though more imperceptibly felt. The gambols of childhood, the recreations of young and old, the pleasures of society, the study of the Arts and Sciences would now be denounced by few as irreligious; but how many still regard them with suspicion, considering them as weaknesses that they must tolerate, instead of acknowledging them as good gifts of God, or as duties that we owe to Him! Hence their feeling that they cannot enter into such a sphere without hurt to the soul and the great weakening of piety; hence the continual restraint that is upon them so unworthy of those who are born unto liberty and who ought to look upon everything in heaven above and earth beneath, in the family, the state, and all the work of ordinary life, with the grateful thought "all are ours," for our "Father made them all." To take an instance: if we heard a number of little children singing hymns, or repeating scriptural lessons, we would be delighted, and if they engaged in such religious exercises heartily would be persuaded that God accepted them, and that the sight must be pleasant to angels as to us. But I believe that there are Christians who would regard with very different feelings the same children keeping holiday in the fields, full of fun and happiness, skipping like lambs in the mead, and bursting into shouts of delight and irrepressible catches of song. I fear that there are some who would look upon such a sight with little sympathy, would let their heads shake and their countenances darken,—who, while admitting that there

was no sin there, would be slow to thank God on the children's behalf for such a life, and who would have no compunction in summoning them from their sports to listen to a sermon. Oh, what a mistaken view of God if it is imagined that He has no pleasure in such a sight. Who made the lark and the nightingale? Who causes every wood to be vocal with music, every stream to ripple a sweet tune? Who sows the fields thick with flowers, and paints the passing cloud, and purifies the snow-flake and the snow-drop? Who made the sportive lambs and the wild deer, and all the domestic creatures that beguile with their plays or their sympathies many a lonely, many a sorrowful hour from us? By whose ordinance is it that the prattle and games of children serve to develop their organs and their limbs, to sweeten their tempers and form their characters? Who alone cares for and loves all little things as well as all great things? God, God only. All are in Him, all flow from Him as music in the bounds of law. Oh, have we yet to learn to see all things in God; to reverence the small as well as the great things because they are His? Truly, great things are in Him; the highest heaven and the deepest hell; thunders and lightnings; ocean depths, skies "sown with stars thick as a field;" seas of light and life, and love unutterable; punishments and woes; thrones of reward, and happiness infinite, all-searching. But, little things also are in God; the babe's first smile, and the smile of dawn and of spring; the starred or mossy flower "born to blush unseen;" the hum of insects and the laughter of young voices—all in Him.* And

> "He prayeth well who loveth well
> Both bird and man, and beast;
> He prayeth best who loveth best
> All things both great and small;
> For the dear God who loveth us,
> He made and loveth all."

* The germ of this idea I got some years ago in "Pulsford's Quiet Hours." I am sorry that I have not the book (which is filled with beautiful thoughts), or I should quote from it literally.

Now then let us see where we are. Man is bound up in the two great departments of God's universe, I have said; and we become unnatural and unhealthy when we confine our view to one side of our being and possessions, one side of truth, happiness, and duty. It is ours to drink from all the streams of happiness that issue from God's throne. Our bodies are not to be macerated, but to be nurtured into strength and beauty. Our characters not to be stunted, not put into straight jackets, but to be disciplined unto all their rightful issues; our minds to be developed, our tastes to be cultivated, our imaginations to be educated, our recreations to be encouraged; no legitimate exercise of any part of our nature to be checked except when it comes into collision with higher claims: and all this to be done—religiously!

And such a combination of the lower and of the higher life is, I believe, what is enjoined in the text. There is nothing ironical nor sarcastic in it, as is generally supposed, no more than in the context. In the preceding verse, the preacher had said that one ought to rejoice all his life, i. e. should ever keep a brave and happy heart; for many diseases both of soul and body take their rise in gloomy and bitter thoughts; while a merry heart is better than medicine. In the opinion of Luther, the man of modern times who had surest faith in spiritual realities, facetious books and music are next best to words of Holy Writ for driving away the devil from us. And the preacher next specifies the time of life in which enjoyment is most natural and attainable. "Young man, walk in the way of thy desire and by the sight of thine eyes," *i.e.* whatever you see within your reach which would increase your happiness, enjoy that. It is yours; but remember always that God will bring you into judgment for the manner in which you use this liberty. In other words, use God's blessings, as comforts and pleasures intended for

you; but beware of abusing them; for know well that He will call thee to account for all that thou doest. Such is the wisdom of Scripture, and it is too broad for the ascetic and the austere, for Scribe and Pharisee. It was lived out in the flesh by our Lord, and it did not procure him the reputation of Saintship. He was called "winebibber and gluttonous, the friend of publicans and sinners." And such liberty may be abused by the weak and licentious; but what of that? "Wisdom is justified of her children"—her own children. I wish you all to understand clearly what is meant here, for I will dare to interpret the bold words of Scripture, and to speak in the pulpit on the actual social questions, the temptations, difficulties, and errors of living men, even as the Prophets and Apostles, the Fathers and the Reformers spoke. Religious people often say to young men, and they say truly, —"We are not miserable, but happy indeed; and if you join us, you shall experience that this is no delusion." But there is a fallacy often implied in such language, and the young man instinctively feels that there is; when he looks into the case he finds that the only sources of pleasure really intended to be allowed are spiritual, or precisely those which he does not believe in, because he is ignorant of them, and which he needs to be educated up to appreciate; while all the well-springs that he has been accustomed to draw from, his body, intellect, and imagination, are tabooed or discouraged, or coldly welcomed; and he says, "I will not give up realities for what are to me only words or cold shadowy abstractions. You feel, if you do not openly say it, that my games and athletic pursuits, my boating, hunting, fishing, my social life or delight in the fine arts are all worldly, unworthy of the attention of a Christian, who ought to give his whole time to prayer-meetings or the study of the Bible. Well, all I say is that I find such recreations, such studies, very real, very

pleasant; they spring from legitimate parts of my nature, and I will not crush them down. I will not be a hypocrite nor an ascetic, for I am sure that I was not intended by my Maker to be either the one or the other." Do I exaggerate? or is it not true that many an honest open-souled nature has been repelled from approaching nearer to God and spiritual things by the essentially Manichean notions that have been presented to him as religion? Too often, I fear, the world has been thought to include not only "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, and everything that is not of the Father," but also almost everything that is of the Father, even nature, society, and the relations and work of ordinary human life. And thus have eternal moral distinctions been obscured, and fictitious standards introduced—exercising a disastrous effect, morally and intellectually, not only upon the priest and recluse, but upon the men who live in the world—on their ties and sympathies, and their conduct of secular business. Whereas I am here this day to give God's sanction to "everything that is of the Father;" yea, even to protest against the suspicion that all that material economy of which I have spoken is opposed to the spiritual, and hurtful to our soul's interests, and therefore a realm in which we are to tread delicately. No, it is not so Spiritually we need the world, as a school, a gymnasium, a "means of grace." Our Lord prayed not that we should be taken out of the world; for we require its hardships and business, the body and all its manifold activities; else why are we sent into the world, thus equipped, at all? The fact is that there is a beautiful harmony between the lower and the higher, the one ministering to the other. All men have a natural desire for happiness, or a principle of self-love, and that is the mightiest spring of the world's motions; and God would educate us to love the highest happiness or Himself, by giv-

ing us lower forms of it to suit our sensuous nature. For, "reason with self-love and conscience are the chief or superior principles in the nature of man, and they, if we understand our true happiness, always lead us the same way."* You fight against God then if you ignore or frown down the legitimate manifestations of any of those principles or desires. In the first place you cannot wholly succeed; and in the next, as far as you do succeed, you make a one-sided and unlovely character, which would be more unlovely still only that nature is too strong to be wholly crushed. And here we have the reason why so many of those who are most honored in religious communities are not the highest style of men and women; why there is in such "good people" often so much that is mean, petty-minded, false, and uncharitable; why they often appear to so great disadvantage beside the so-called men and women of the world.

So then "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth; but" — yes! with all the admissions that I have most frankly made as to the reality, the importance, the godliness of the material, it is not all, nor is it the chief good. There is another system of things, unseen, but higher and permanent, and to it we are related. And as the King dominates over the subject, as the real work of life dominates over trivialities, so must ever the higher dominate over the lower. Take all, O friend, that thy nature desires, from God. He is a King. Giving doth not impoverish him. He grudges thee no happiness, takes no pleasure in rueful looks. But remember that He is a King; has authority and jurisdiction by right divine; has a realm wide as infinity, all its complicated interests in His hands; and that if you, by your life fight against Him, if you abuse His gifts and mock His restraints, if you neglect duty and

* Bishop Butler.

lead others from Him by your selfish ungrateful example, He will come to you, will meet you "terrible as death, relentless as doom," will judge you as traitors and women who break wedlock are judged, and damn you for ever in endless hell.

O brothers, sisters! let it not be! A nobler life than the sensual is offered; one begun on earth, lived in the flesh, but the pulses of which beat through all the ages to come. "The heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner; but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished."

Thus may we "make the best of both worlds." Thus are we to consider the respective and often conflicting claims of both. Because all our life is not asked for special spiritual devotions and studies, that does not mean that we are to devote none of it to such exercises. Because there is a time for the material, for business, art, recreation, there should also be a time for prayer, for Scripture study and thought, for Christian Communion. And not only so, but all our lower is to be regulated by the necessities of our higher life; our ordinary life to be leavened with spiritual aims and influences. And the great meaning and beauty of a life thus lived in the lower is that it leads us to a fuller life in the higher part of our nature, because it makes us feel "as ever in the Great Taskmaster's eye." Viewing all our sources of happiness as from God, we are taught to regard Him as the true centre of our being. And then we are blessed with the only happiness that is worthy of man, because it springs from the only pure and perennial fount. It springs from within, from the living soul; not from senses that become dull, from nerves and appetites that blunt, from passions that die out. And then only are we truly religious; we are in sympathy with the Supreme Good; we love what He loves, and hate

what He hates; we have laid hold of salvation. "And so we live, or else we have no life." "Marvel not that I say unto you, ye must be born again."

Unto such a life are we called; a life weighted with the responsibilities of freedom, of personal happiness subordinated to law and to others' good, instead of a selfish Christless happiness; a life in the present, yet a life of faith. And does not such a view best ennoble and consecrate this world. It is seen to be no mere stage on which actors are to play out their brief parts with elegant inanities, where the only objects of desire are the bubbles of sense; but the ante-chamber and workshop of eternity.

> "Life is real, life is earnest,
> And the grave is not its goal;
> Dust thou art, to dust returneth,
> Was not spoken of the soul."

Every deed done by us is as a seed which is sure to spring up and meet us and others hereafter in its full development, to be a joy or to be a curse. It is difficult to feel that. Our deeds seem to be forgotten, to leave no sign. They drop from us into the time stream and seem to sink into oblivion. But no! they are not lost; they die not, cannot die; they are as the corn seed cast on the Nile flood, which is found as bread "after many days."

This, O my people, is my New Year's morning sermon: to show to you the meaning of this life—its responsibility—and the glory that awaiteth us. Thank God for life, for this new year! and pardon the sins of the past year! How quickly it has gone from us and gone forever! Time seems to be ever standing on the brink of a cataract. Have you ever seen Niagara? Strike the river above the falls, and accompany its course; it scarcely moves you think. But soon there is no doubt of that. It flows down slowly, strongly,—and now it is more speedy, it breaks into rapids,—it breaks

among rocks and wooded islets,—it hurries on,—and now with a resistless rolling plunge it has vanished into the abyss! You strain your eyes over the gulf, but impenetrable mists hide it from your sight. You hear only its thundrous echoes, and you turn away in sadness and awe, as if you had seen the whole of it, as if it were gone forever! So roll down "from sunlight to the sunless land" the years and generations of men! so our lives disappear as our life current is broken! And yet not such is the end either of river or of man. Onward—on the other side of the mists, the stream flows on, calmer, deeper, grander than before. "Our life is rounded with a sleep," and then we awake in the eternities!

O Great Father of the everlasting ages! in this "solemn twilight of a new year's morn," take our weak hands in Thine, as we stand together here, nearer to the grave by another milestone than we ever stood before! Lead us on from this threshold of the year out into the future, with hopeful hearts, wisely saddened with the memories of departed years, to meet our new responsibilities, and to receive thy new blessings!